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ABSTRACT

Teachers of composition are modernists because the teaching of composition has been, and continues to be, a modernist enterprise in American colleges and universities. The question explored in this paper is, why? Why do practitioners of composition remain mired in the modern? Since the 1980s writing teachers have had a sense as a profession that the term "postmodernism" was important, but the more that was learned about the implications of postmodernism to the profession, the less writing teachers were able institutionally to accommodate it. The paper considers a number of reasons why theory has not simply "trickled down" to practice. Its claim is that by taking a cue from the deconstructive tactics of G. Spivak and J. Butler and by borrowing the modern (postmodern) subject that has been posited here, writing teachers may move themselves and their students through L. Bitzer's rhetorical situation, past Pratt's contact zone, on to the postmodern "pagus," and beyond. The paper turns to teaching, not just theorizing, wanting to keep in mind an attitude toward teaching, a "letting learn": what the author/instructor does in her class is link together a number of tactics that might make "letting learn" possible. From a postmodern perspective, the hope is that at some future-anterior time the instructor and her students will have learned not just to think differently but to act and ultimately react differently. The paper then describes some of the instructor's teaching tactics. Cites 21 works. (NKA)

# Postmodern Rhetorical Situations.

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# Postmodern Rhetorical Situations

I want to begin my paper with one line, "We are all modernists." We are all modernists, though some of us might wish to be postmodernists, might write about postmodernism, might hope to teach our classes and even live our lives according to a postmodern ethic. We are all, nevertheless, modernists. We are modernists because we are teachers, we teach composition, and the teaching of composition (as postmodern theorists Victor Vitanza, Lynn Worsham, and Michelle Ballif, among others) have told us, has been and continues to be a modernist enterprise in American colleges and universities (see Lanham, Vitanza, "Three," etc.).

The question that I will explore in this essay, then, is why? Why do practitioners of composition remain mired in the modern? It's not for lack of trying to be postmodern, surely. Since the 80s we have had a sense as a profession that the term "postmodernism" was important, but the more we learned about the implications of postmodernism to our profession, the less we were able institutionally to accommodate it. Richard Miller points to this problem in his 1994 College English article, "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone," when he tells us that in the face of postmodern theory's desire to "celebrate[s] partial readings, multiple subjectivities, marginalized positions, and subjugated knowledges" (206), practitioners of composition have yet to allow for sufficient "trickledown" from that theory into our teaching practices.

There are a number of reasons why theory has not simply "trickled down" to practice. Paul De Man, for example, has spoken of the resistance of theory to codification ("The Resistance to Theory"). There is also the resistance within the academic community itself to such trickling down, especially when a theory–like that of the postmodern--questions the very act of codification and compromises the closely held desires of many to teach and empower students. Finally, that which is specifically postmodern resists presentation and representation. Thus, as Jean Francois Lyotard tells us in The Postmodern Condition, if the postmodern is that which works to resist and disrupt all grand narratives, then to coopt the subversive postmodern, to tame it and give it a name is to rob it of its force.

In this light, the social-epistemic rhetoricians among us–and I have long been sympathetic with the desires of this group--may feel robbed of our newfound power/knowledge! We may feel that we have gotten a handle on the postmodern, that we have accepted many postmodern premises--including the multiple, heterogenous subject--and that we have made good use of this knowledge in our teaching practices. But what if I suggest, along with the theorists of the postmodern mentioned earlier, that, for the most part, the enterprise of social-epistemic rhetoricians is not anti-foundational in a postmodernist sense at all; it is modernist in nature, with its foundational desire to "make good use" of knowledge, to focus on critical consciousness, and to liberate or

empower students.

To further study this state of affairs, I turn to that incredibly useful topos, the rhetorical situation. Since 1968, one of the watch phrases of the modernist enterprise of teaching composition has been the rhetorical situation, a phrase coined by Lloyd Bitzer, that asks its proponents and students to consider exigence, audience, constraints and self when coming to any pragmatic act of communication (see Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation"). As a teacher of composition, I have found that the rhetorical situation and its constituent elements help my students understand more fully the complexity of the rhetorical enterprise they find themselves in as students of writing. The rhetorical situation appeals to the pragmatically modernist pedagogical side of me. But what can it do for the postmodernist side of me that desires not so much to teach, as to practice a Heideggerian "let learn?" (Heidegger "What is Called Thinking?").

If we look at each of the elements of the rhetorical situation in turn-- exigence, audience, constraints, and self--and if we know anything at all about postmodernism, we know that each of these terms, and, indeed, the very idea of "situatedness," has been problematized in ways that might render them completely contrary to a postmodernist enterprise that questions the very possibility of the act of communication and talks in terms of subjects rather than human individuals or agents, foreclosing the possibility of audience and self as they are classically understood. Given this problematic, how might it be possible to have postmodern rhetorical situations, and, if we can have them, to what end?

To journey to the non-place of postmodern rhetorical situations, I begin by way of a detour to one of the foremost theorists of the postmodern, Jean Francois Lyotard. For Lyotard, the modern and the postmodern are not historical time periods; rather, the modern and the postmodern are artistic forces that function by pushing against what Lyotard has described as "the effects of reality, or . . . the fantasies of realism" or experience (Postmodern 74), which argue that what is "real" exists unproblematically, and that it may be depicted accurately with the correct language or by means of an appropriate visual representation.

The postmodern, for Lyotard, is "a part of the modern" (Postmodern 79). And it claims: "All that has been received, if only yesterday . . . , must be suspected" (79). This implicit argument appears in the workings of avant-garde art which constantly push against the art that has gone before. Thus: "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (79).

For Lyotard, to be a postmodernist, to resist the grand narratives of Enlightenment thought, one must persistently subvert the language game of knowledge which privileges the speaker or master or teacher and opt instead for the language game of art in which the focus is on the speaker as listener, the language game I call "letting learn." The language game of art takes place not in the classical polis or the modernist rhetorical situation, but in the pagus, the realm of the pagans in which, according to Lyotard, "the gods have their stories" and "humans have their . . . stories. And these two sets of stories are . . . two centers that send out their elements to negotiate . . . on

the boundaries" (Just Gaming 43). Lyotard's gods are not the omniscient god of the Hebrews. They are the gods of the Greeks who, as Heraclitus tells us, "do not speak but signify," signifying, just as humans do, in ways that are subject to misinterpretation. Thus, Lyotard goes on to say, "One does not know whom one is speaking to; one must be very prudent; one must negotiate; one must ruse; and one must be on the lookout when one has won" (Just Gaming 43).

If, for the moment, we allow Lyotard's pagus to serve figuratively as our postmodern rhetorical situation, we are left with a new set of questions. What exigences or problems would we find in this imagined non-space? What constraints? Who or what is the audience? And who is the speaker or self? For the sake of time, I will confine my remarks to the last element: the self or the postmodern subject, to ask how some current rhetoricians are distinguishing it and to suggest how this subject might be distinguished otherwise.

**The modernist self or the postmodern subject**

Any number of social-epistemic rhetoricians, including Lester Faigley, Patricia Bizzell, and Susan Jarratt, have embraced the postmodern subject, typically allowing that it is a heterogenous subject that may be invested with some sort of agency for social change. In Fragments of Rationality, for example, Lester Faigley states:

> By divorcing the subject from prevailing notions of the individual, either the freely choosing individual of capitalism or the interpellated individual of Althusserian Marxism, postmodern theory understands subjectivity as heterogenous and constantly in flux . . . . The subject, like judgments of value and validations, has no grounding outside contingent discourses. (Faigley, Fragments of Rationality 226-27; qtd. In Bizzell "Prospects" 38).

Bizzell, like Faigley, finds a value in the postmodern subject described by him since it can lead us to understand that such a constituted subject "works against unjust discrimination on the basis of difference." "But," she adds, noting a logical contradiction, "if we are postmodern subjects ourselves, then we have no way of establishing our implicit claim that working against unjust discrimination is valuable" (39). Faigley, following Lyotard, (and I would add, Derrida) claims that "all we can do is accept responsibility for continually examining and questioning the ethical positions that are created when we use language" ( 40). But this is a a position Bizzell resists in her effort to play the knowledge game and give her postmodern subject reason-able ground to stand on.

Following, but revising Faigley, Bizzell, moves back and forth between the words "subject" and "individual," accepting the postmodern subject, yet maintaining that this subject can achieve rhetorical agency through a serendipitous convergence of its "histories" (40). Additionally, she claims, "the subject can become critically aware of, though not distanced from, these histories–and the more historical consciousness, the more potential to bring the individual's unique creative energy or serendipity to bear on the mix" (40).

Susan Jarratt's work takes a similar trajectory. In a related effort to raise the consciousness of her students, situate their experience in an historical context, and encourage them to let go of essentialist notions of the subject, she states:

> My hopes are pinned on composition courses whose instructors help their students to locate personal experience in historical and social contexts—courses that lead students to see how differences emerging from their texts and discussions have more to do with those contexts than they do with an essential and unarguable individuality ("Feminism and Composition" in Contending with Words 121).

As I read these writers, their theories take them up to the postmodern subject, but their theories–and their link to postmodernism–begin to break down when they seek to place their subject into a world that they wish to change. What sort of rhetorical situation are they finding themselves in? As the title of this paper would attest, they are situated in paradox, in a trope that defies logical contradictions. In the rest of this paper, I will maintain that that is necessarily where postmodern situations are dislocated, and that we would do well to embrace rather than resist this problematic. Indeed as Vitanza tells us through Lyotard, the work of the postmodern is to seek out such paradoxes, such logical contradictions or differends and bear witness to them ("Three Countertheses" in Contending With Words 166-167).

**A (modern) postmodern subject**

Turning from the theories and hopes of Faigley, Bizzell, and Jarratt to my own, I don't pretend to have a postmodern subject. Rather, I posit a modern (postmodern) subject that must negotiate its own psychical and socially coded resistances along its way to negotiating in Lyotard's pagus.

Following Faigley's and Vitanza's appropriation of Lyotard and enlisting Lacan, the subject that I advocate is a hybrid of modernity and postmodernity. Just as Jean-Francois Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition tells us that the postmodern is always incipient in the modern, so is the subject, by my definition, a modern yet incipiently postmodern one. Just as the modern subject is tied to a fixed and stable notion of identity, to a kind of Enlightenment subjectivity that believes it can know and act and resist such a concept as a dispersed subject, the incipient postmodern subject makes possible kairotic moments leading to metamorphosis and change.

This hybrid subject that I describe may desire the sort of historical consciousness argued for by Bizzell, or may desire to be situated vis-a vis Jarratt's rhetoric, yet since this subject is itself conflicted, riven by internal psychical resistances, it may be unable to take the kinds of risks to responsibly act or critically think that Faigley and Bizzell advocate (see Alcorn). My work, as someone who would imagine postmodern rhetorical situations, is not so much to foster critical consciousness, as it is to develop tactics whereby the students and I might learn to recognize and then interrupt or disrupt unconscious ideological codings that prevent us from taking risks for change–not by thinking through the knowledge game of critical consciousness and its attendant ethic of responsible action, but by venturing the language game of art and speaking as a listener in

the pagus, with all the attendant risks involved.

How can this be done? My theory is that the only way to make resistance to hegemonic social praxes or hegemonic psychical inscriptions possible is to first interrupt the social praxes or discourse patterns that perpetually reify and thus "naturalize" these habits of living and these patterns of thinking, habits and patterns grounded in the language game of knowledge and the phallocentrism and logocentrism that inform that game. The question is, "How do we encourage our students to recognize and resist cultural codings that repress them?

To obliquely answer this question I turn to Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler, two theorists whose deconstructive tactics in relation to gender and subjectivity underlie my own pedagogy. From Gayatri Spivak I borrow a theory of interruption and a mandate to begin where we are. From Butler I borrow a theory of the performative and its deconstituting possibilities vis-a-vis identity.

As Spivak notes, in "Strategy, Identity, Writing," as soon as we think we have determined how to theorize a subject position, for example, we are interrupted in our task by the realization that we will "never be able to finally ground [a subject position's] theoretical form" (44). For Spivak, this interruptive disjunction between theory and practice can best be expressed by the phrase: "You must begin where you are" (44 my emphasis; cf. Derrida Of Grammatology, 162).

For Butler, the performative is "not a singular or deliberate 'act,' but . . . the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (2), the effect, for example, named the human subject. But, she maintains, it is not some personified notion of discourse that constructs the subject, but repeated patterns of discourse that construct the subject. And this system of subject formation is not closed, for, in the process of repetition, "gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities . . . that . . . escape or exceed the norm" (10). Thus, in this very process of repetition, instability in the norm may be produced and change in identity becomes possible. In this usage discourse does not construct bodies; but rather "there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body" (10).

My claim, then, is that by taking our cue from the deconstructive tactics of Spivak and Butler and by borrowing the modern (postmodern) subject that I have posited, we may move ourselves and our students through Bitzer's rhetorical situation, past Pratt's contact zone (see Miller), on to the postmodern pagus, and beyond.

I want to turn now to teaching, not just theorizing, and when I get there I want to keep in mind an attitude toward teaching, a "letting learn." The state of mind that I am working to articulate relies on interruptive tactics rather than global strategies, tactics that interrupt complacency, that tendency to get comfortable–even, and perhaps especially, my own. So what are my tactics? I offer them here, but I do not offer a methodology, as you will see. What I do in my class is link together a number of tactics that might make what I call "letting learn" possible. And a caveat is in order: I do not believe that what will have been learned is learned in the space and time of my classroom. From a postmodern perspective, my hope, and I do have one, is that at some future-

anterior time my students and I will have learned not just to think differently, but to act and ultimately react differently.

Here are some of my teaching tactics:

In my effort to consider and reconsider issues of gender, an important theme in my Honors Comp I and Comp II courses, I present recent texts that do not agree on gender questions: one takes a deconstructivist position on gender and language, one takes an essentialist position on gender, one takes a social constructivist position, one takes a post-marxist position on gender and class, etc. We begin with the line, "The eye is never naked" (Steiner 132 ), and we go on from there, moving back and forth in time through Beauvoir's The Second Sex, Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, Freud's Dora, and Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, persistently questioning problematic rhetorical situations along the way. In both courses, following a kind of postmodern pastiche, I am interested in mixing and linking in new ways across genders, continents, and time periods, across news articles, philosophical treatises, and literature.

My aim here is not to teach particular lessons about gender, nor is it necessarily to instill new beliefs in the students about gender, nor is it to emancipate students from their gender. Typically, the beliefs of Freshmen about these issues have been little examined before this time, so to do as Spivak says and begin where they are is at once problematic and necessary. It is necessary because to most of my students their beliefs on these issues go without saying, and they find it difficult to say what those beliefs are much less how they might be otherwise.

In other words, my students' experience, their education, their religious training, all work to make sure that their responses are typical, not revolutionary, and the initial response papers they write before class discussion tend to reflect this. But the longer sustained paper that they write over several weeks requires them to begin linking at least two of these disparate, sometimes dissonant, pieces that we have read, and it is in this linkage of dissonances that something new can happen. For if, as Spivak argues, we say yes to interruptions and at the same time begin where we are, we are opening up the possibility of situating ourselves in a paradoxical space, a postmodern situation. And if, as Butler says, "there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body" (Bodies that Matter 10), then through the agency of language, through this very process of iterating otherwise, we may interrupt unconscious psychical codings, potentially disrupt social codings, and when next we begin where we are, we may be differently, and we may begin from a different, a postmodern, a non-space.

In this non-space we can then turn to theorists of the postmodern like Worsham and Ballif and Vitanza for new "ways of proceeding" (see Caughie xi). For I find myself in sympathy with this group of thinkers, in agreement with them. Admittedly, the modernist composition professor in me at first wants to ask, "How do we get to the pagus?" and "What thread can I leave for my students so that they can follow me there?" Yet at the same time the postmodernist artist in me knows that there is no "there" to get to. To imagine a postmodern situation requires conjuring a state of mind, not a place, and it is a state of mind best described as one that pushes and pulls

between the modernist and postmodernist forces that by turns lay claim to us all.

For when we teach for postmodern rhetorical situations, when we teach to "let learn,"we teach, as Worsham tells us, so that our students can "make something of what has been made of them" ("Writing" 102). When we teach for postmodern rhetorical situations, we will find, along with Ballif, "women and all Others who no longer know their place [and] no longer keep it" ("Seducing Composition" 89). When we teach for postmodern rhetorical situations, we don't ask our students to believe in something. Rather, as Vitanza suggests, "[We] believe in them, but more importantly for them" ("On Objects"; First emphasis mine).

When we teach for postmodern rhetorical situations, we teach according to a postmodern ethic, that asks us, along with Derrida, to think the University and the abyss that lies beneath it all at once (see Derrida "The Principle of Reason," 17). This is the modernist postmodernist move that I am advocating; it is a move that allows us to close our eyes to imagine postmodern rhetorical situations that may lead us not out of the cave or to typical harmonies or agreement, but to the pagus and beyond, where we may tell our little narratives and negotiate with the gods.

I would like to end with one line, "We are all postmodernists." We are all postmodernists because we are teachers, and we teach composition.

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